

*The Swiss do not talk about "education for a democratic society." They discipline the mind; and the disciplined mind takes care of the democracy.*

## *Some Lessons from Swiss Education*

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Almost every newspaper that rolls off the press these days offers new revelations concerning the spectacular educational advances of Soviet Russia. And properly (albeit belatedly) alarmed, we are opening our eyes to the lag in our own public school program.

To be sure, we did not *have* to wait for a chance to peek over the Iron Curtain. Our complacency about American education might have received the same therapeutic shock years earlier if we had ever been at all curious as to how our schools compare with those of any other Western nation. A good many American parents get assigned to jobs abroad these days, and have to put their children in foreign schools. Did you ever talk with one of these parents? All of them that I have met are indignantly persuaded that most American schools come off a poor second.

For instance, take Swiss education. Two of my children had to take it, in spite of a language barrier, when I had a year's hitch in Geneva a few years ago. They attended a grass-roots, small-town public school. What I learned that year as a Genevese parent *pro tem* increased my respect for the Swiss as educators and defenders of democracy. I'm afraid it only increased my blood pressure as an American parent and taxpayer.

From kindergarten on, going to school in Switzerland is serious business. Swiss school authorities believe in discipline—and that doesn't mean just good manners. In my dictionary, discipline is "training that develops self-control, character, or orderliness and efficiency." Naturally that *includes* good manners. In fact, Article No. 106 of the Regulations of the Canton of Geneva leave little room for monkey business, for it states flatly that pupils must:

"Observe order and quiet in class and in the school;

"be obedient, attentive, industrious, and diligent;

"conform to the rules of politeness and *savoir-vivre*;

"maintain with their teachers relations characterized by respect, confidence, and frankness."

Elementary school grades are sent home each week—and "conduct" grades carry full weight when the teacher figures up general averages. I knew of one sharp little Swiss joker whose behavior pulled his average down below what it took to win an academic prize that year. He cried real tears when he found out what had happened, and (let us hope!) learned a lesson.

But other kinds of discipline get just as

prominent a billing. That same Article No. 106 says further that pupils must:

- “take care of school property and materials;
- “be punctual and regular in attendance;
- “come to class clean and properly dressed.”

Even a first-grader keeps a separate notebook for each subject. He makes all his entries in it according to a fixed, logical system. He underlines all his headings with a pen and ruler. Careful handwriting is an important item. The pupil writes with ink from the start, and gets into real trouble if he does not soon learn to avoid blots and messy school work.

Most striking of all, though, is the way they insist on neatness and order and method in the *mental* development of the child. A Swiss first grade pupil does more writing than many American students have ever done when they enter college. In all of the writing that Swiss teacher assigns, she puts as much stress on the *organization* of materials and the *precision* in expression as on the knowledge of facts. Moreover, she tolerates no sleazy grammar or usage.

It is not surprising, then, to find that geometry is introduced in what corresponds to our third grade—and is carried on systematically over a period of years. Oddly enough, they even *call* it geometry. I'll bet that if anyone ever dreamed of teaching so substantial a subject to *our* children, it would be called “Block Play,” or “Shapey-Wapey.”

In Geneva they study vocabulary and spelling under logical subject headings. Each year, under each heading, they add more grown-up words—until, in the sixth grade, pupils have manipulated and reviewed what the official textbook calls “the seven thousand words that can be considered as the most important for understanding a text on a general subject and for expressing simple ideas correctly.” Thus under the heading “Government” words like *country, state, law*, appear at the lowest

level; *liberty, kingdom, colony*, are added a year later; *despotism, autonomy, protectorate*, occur in the most advanced column.

How many sixth graders do *you* know who have a vocabulary of seven thousand words?

Among the great authors of French literature represented in the Genevese fifth grade reader are Molière, Flaubert, Maupassant, Gide, and Giono. This would be a little like expecting our ten-year olds to read selections from Shakespeare, Thackeray, Dickens, Henry James, and Steinbeck—instead of Dick and Jane. Not too long ago this kind of fare was standard procedure in our schools. I dare you to test your little fourth grade Willie on an old fourth grade McGuffey or Appleton reader.

You can get an idea of the general level of the Swiss fifth grade child (and of the kind of civic lessons he is exposed to) from a random glance at his history textbook—due allowance being made for the pitfalls of translation:

“He had a keen intellect. Never, even during his giddy youth, did the taste for boisterous pleasures stifle in Bonivard the fervor for lofty studies. Reading and travel widened his horizon and matured his naturally sagacious and observing character: to the prestige of rank and the elegance of manner were linked in him the advantages of that solid classical culture that was so avidly sought by the best minds of the sixteenth century.”

Here, then, is a program for stretching young minds. Here is a straining after literacy at a tender age. Words give power, but often it seems as if American children are systematically deprived of this power. Long ago, Professor Thorndike made up lists of the words that an American child of a given grade-level usually knows. Obviously, these lists should have been used as a springboard. A third grade teacher's job was to start from the third grade word list and see how far beyond it she could get her charges. Instead, writers of textbooks have as often as not worked hard to

stay inside the limits of such a list! There are textbooks being used in our high schools today of which it is boasted—mind you!—that the language used is exclusively the language of the high school freshman. Some of us thought that the school's job was to push a child on to a more advanced level, not hold him back where he is.

Now let's look at a few examples of the way Swiss educators demand orderly thinking in class work. First, an exercise from the fifth grade French textbook:

No. 78—The propositions of the following text are not in their logical order. Reestablish the logical order.

### IN THE COURTYARD

From time to time, an apple fell into the grass around the trees. The tops of them were singing an endless, sad lament. It was very large, filled with ancient apple trees, squatty and twisted and covered with fruit. I went out into the yard. They seemed to reach the clouds. Four rows of beech trees surrounded this enclosure.

Adapted from G. de Maupassant.

As early as the fourth grade little Jean-Pierre is facing problems like this in geometry:

No. 172—In a square having 60 millimeters on a side, we should like to mark off two right triangles in which the sides of the right angle are 50 millimeters, and also four squares having 12 millimeters on a side. *How must we go about it?* (My italics.)

Or a year later:

No. 220—It takes 384 square centimeters of paper to cover a cube. What is the volume of this cube?

Now, from fourth grade arithmetic—and again, notice the thought-provoking question at the end:

No. 263—A merchant sells 18 meters from a bolt of cloth, at a profit of 2.50 francs per meter. The rest is sold at a

loss of .75 francs per meter. The final profit is 35.25 francs. Can we calculate the original length of the piece of cloth?

And in fifth grade arithmetic our pupil is wrestling with such problems as:

No. 363—A stock of pamphlets is in three piles: the first pile contains  $\frac{1}{6}$  of them; the second pile contains several fifths of them; the third pile has 4 pamphlets. What is the total number of pamphlets?

Let us suppose that after the fifth grade Jean-Pierre comes over to go to school for a year with his American cousin. Do you know how his mind will be exercised and his imagination set on fire? Here is a page from a standard American sixth grade arithmetic book:

### TOD'S HALLOWEEN PARTY

Tod served sweet cider and doughnuts at his Halloween party. The cider was in big mugs that held  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups. How many mugs could be filled from 1 gallon (16 cups) of cider?

This is followed by careful explanation, and then problems such as:

No. 2. It took Tod  $1\frac{2}{3}$  minutes to cut out a paper cat. At that rate, how many could he cut out in  $\frac{1}{2}$  hour? HELPER. First think, " $\frac{1}{2}$  hour equals (?) minutes."

Almost two hundred pages later in the year, in an "Arithmetical Thinking Test," Jean-Pierre will be asked to comment on:

2. Walter said: "Three-fourths of all my cousins spent Christmas at our house. The other half of them were at my grandmother's." Is there anything wrong with Walter's statement?

3. When she was making a graph, Alice used a line  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch long to stand for 50, and a line  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches long to stand for 100. Was that correct?

And an American eighth grade text, among its "Problems for Good Thinkers"

(it does not offer very many) can go no further than:

How many circles with a two-inch radius can be drawn side by side in a circle with an 8-inch diameter?

Which will weigh more, the water that fills a cylinder 6" high and 4" in diameter, or the water that fills a rectangular prism 6" high and 4" square at the base?

Why should you be able to give the answer without doing any figuring? (Frankly, I don't know how to do *any* arithmetic without "doing any figuring.")

My Swiss-first-grade son took daily dictation, in French, with pen and ink, on subject involving such things as the nest of the blackbird and the corolla of the primrose. My American-first-grade son spent his time with crayons, drawing shapeless mailmen when the sound of "mm" was up for consideration. He tried to draw a hole to rhyme with a pictured bowl. The next year he had moved on to cutting out and pasting pictures of things beginning with "ah". And in third grade he was promoted to "s" and "sh" words—still *via* scissors and the paste pot, it should go without saying—and this time in the name of "speech correction!" Up to that time I had always supposed that speech work would involve some use of the voice.

Obviously, elementary schooling in Switzerland demands hard work on the part of the pupil. More than that, it requires what we used to call "homework." In Geneva, a parent does not simply take it for granted that his child has school work to do at home; those "Regulations" stipulate among the "rights and duties of the parents" that parents must "supervise school work done at home."

All these quotations from the Regulations, by the way, appear in the fifteen pages of fine print that are a part of the official elementary school report card. The final item in this sizable booklet is the *Parents' Endorsement*; "The undersigned declares that he has taken cognizance of the provisions that appear on pages 2, 3, 4, 5,

6, 7, 8, 9, and 40 of this bulletin. Date  
..... Signature....."

If some belated champion of "Progressive" education tries to persuade you that so businesslike and disciplined an educational system could only turn out regimented, frail neurotics—don't listen to him. It turns out instead tough-minded, tough-bodied, rosy-cheeked, and relatively happy citizens. Intelligent discipline does not stifle; it creates power and poise. On the other hand, as any American teacher of college freshmen can tell you, the elementary or high school that encourages children to be "spontaneous" and to "express themselves," without first providing the solid grounding and discipline that they need, produces glib ignoramuses and shallow brats, not original geniuses. If a Swiss child has anything to "express," he will do so the more effectively for his serious training and knowledge of facts. As for overtaxing the child—nonsense. The young human animal is tough. The parents of any normally healthy and active American child know all too well that his class work occupies only a fraction of his energy and capacity.

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If going to school is to be a serious business, it ought to show prompt, tangible returns. The Swiss are smart enough to have worked out a system of rewards—rewards that mean something even to the very young. One of these is the Spring Excursion. For weeks before this big event, children are on their good behavior. Each year a given class travels to a new spot in Switzerland or nearby France. They move farther and farther from home base as the children grow older. By the end of his school days, a young Genevese has thus visited a variety of important scenic or historic landmarks. A first grade class may only go, by bus and inclined railway, for a picnic in a nearby mountain pass. My fifth grade son spent two days with his teacher and classmates on a camping trip to a jewel-like Alpine lake high up in the Valais.

The government pays enough of the cost of these excursions to take the burden off the poorer pupils; the pupil's token payment maintains his self-respect and reminds him that you don't get something for nothing in this life. The benefits, in the form of classroom incentive and enlightened citizenship, are enormous.

There is still a greater event in the school year: Promotion Day. This falls on the first Sunday after the last day of classes in the spring, for on Sunday Papa as well as Mama can pay tribute to the children. The whole community spends the whole day honoring youthful scholarship. There are scholastic prizes and parades, speeches and free ice cream, formal exercises and merry-go-rounds, annual reports and puppet shows. One of those academic prizes—a print of an old street scene in Geneva—now hangs on my living room wall: the choicest possession of a son of mine. He is not a budding art collector, but he can put two and two together. The applause of an entire community of grownups persuaded him that day that the prize, and what one does in school to earn it, are of grave importance.

This tradition of Promotion Day seems pretty deeply rooted. A few years ago a number of Genevese high brass were invited to appear on the platform with the President of France at a ceremony held in Strasbourg—an impressive international occasion. Unfortunately, the date conflicted with the Genevese secondary school Promotion Day, so the officials in question sent their regrets—to the President of the French Republic.

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The methods used for training the teachers who operate this network of schools ought to cast further light on the success of Swiss education. Geneva, like the rest of the world, has had its teacher shortage of late, and so has had to compromise at times with its normal procedure, but the basic program for training elementary teachers is as follows:

Candidates for the pedagogical course must already hold their degree from the Collège. They are given a vocational aptitude test, and the number of students *needed* in a given year is admitted. In other words, in normal times, this is a competitive examination. Those selected are sent for a year to the University to study in the Faculty of Letters. They are paid a small monthly stipend and are usually given some opportunity to do substitute teaching. At the end of the year, the least promising candidates are eliminated. Next they are given a year at the Institute of Pedagogical studies, formerly called the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute. In the third year, they are apprentice teachers and their pay has been raised substantially. At the end of this year, they receive their first regular positions.

In most of the Swiss cantons there are normal schools which telescope this program to some extent, and allow earlier completion of teacher training. Nowhere in Switzerland, however, is there anything comparable to the waste motion and irrelevant criteria and insistence of method-over-substance by means of which teachers are licensed in most of our states. Now is not the moment to elaborate the shortcomings of American teacher training programs. Suffice it to say there are those who contend that in our country the mediocre are encouraged to teach; that the competent are effectively discouraged; that our most poorly educated college graduates become our public school teachers; that, *ergo*, mediocrity has become entrenched and self-perpetuating in the schools for which we pay and on which we must rely. This writer has attempted to substantiate these contentions in "The Stranglehold on Education," in the Summer, 1949 issue of the *Bulletin* of the American Association of University Professors and "The Stranglehold Revisited," in the Summer, 1954 issue of the same review.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Serious efforts toward improvement of American teacher-education are being made in some institutions, but the going is slow.

The Swiss Federal government contributes to the program of education by cantons, and has a most ingenious scheme by which to determine whether or not it is getting its money's worth. This is an elaborate system of comprehensive examinations, conducted outside the schools. When a boy finishes his schooling and reports for his required military service, he takes what is called a "civil examination for recruits," along with his physical exam and the other ordeals usually associated with induction into military life.

The recruits' examinations are conducted by regional boards of "experts," all of whom are school teachers, directors, and inspectors, serving in their own section of the country. Let me describe a typical examination to show just how an annual evaluation of education all over Switzerland is effected.

Nothing about this test is casual. Every detail is painstakingly planned in advance, and experts are thoroughly briefed. During the first part of the examination, the recruit is asked to write a brief biography, a business letter, and a composition on an assigned subject. The letter and the composition are carefully fitted to special backgrounds: for example, the city boy may have to answer a newspaper advertisement which offer to exchange a well lighted three room apartment for a four room apartment; his country cousin may be asked to write to an advertiser who wishes to trade an Aebi mowing machine for a farm wagon with sideboards.

This written test is supplemented by an oral examination in which an attempt is made to put the recruit at his ease and get him to participate freely in a general discussion. This interrogation is conducted by an expert who, at a given time, has before him only five recruits, of roughly comparable backgrounds. It lasts thirty-five minutes, and is carefully planned in such a way that a single general question may serve as a springboard for a discussion in the fields of geography, economics, civics, and history. For each session of these ex-

aminations, each expert must select and prepare his subject from current events.

In 1944, for example, a theme chosen by one of the Genevese experts was a contemporary proposal to establish a great international aviation field in the Utzenstorf area. With maps at hand, that area, including its subsoil, was discussed. Then the question was raised: "Why not simply enlarge an already existing airfield?" . . . and so the discussion moved out to Swiss geography in general. Such a field would link Switzerland with various world capitals . . . and so, briefly, to world geography. But Utzenstorf is the chief wheat growing region of Switzerland, and so we go on to a bit of economic geography (including importations from what countries on the map?) and problems of raising and improving agricultural yields.

Now, to build this field, valuable land must of course be expropriated, and so we are discussing civics. Here we work our way up through the various courts and councils to which a citizen can appeal. From this, to a broader view of governmental jurisdiction and the philosophical principles underlying government, as well as precise knowledge of governmental machinery, is an easy step.

It just happens, too, that in 1339 an important battle was fought in the Utzenstorf region . . . and by now it should be easy to imagine how a Swiss teacher could develop out of this historical tidbit a fairly exhaustive though brief study of local and general history. And so, of course, he does.

These examinations are thoughtfully graded and analyzed by conscientious, trained men. Reports from individual experts and regional boards are studied and collated. The program has achieved considerable continuity, and constant effort is being made to achieve a degree of uniformity of procedure which utilizes the best of past experience. And thus federal Swiss authorities have, from year to year, an admirable instrument with which to discover which schools are notably strong or weak, and by means of which local school

authorities can become aware of what is going on, countrywide.

The federal authorities remain scrupulously aware of the fact that their role in each canton is only advisory, but that is sufficient. In the first place, with typically sound insight, they utilize local experts, and so local educators are a party to federal efforts to improve local standards. In the second place, education occupies so important a place in the Swiss hierarchy of institutions that local pride would dictate taking all possible steps to correct a situation if the Chief Expert in Bern were to express a criticism or make a suggestion. In practice, he does not even do this. In 1940, the Chief Expert said in his annual report: "I leave it for the experts to inform the school authorities in their canton." In 1945, his successor quoted this statement and remarked simply: "Instructional practice is a cantonal affair." This hands-off policy, and the fact that the benefits of federal aid and evaluation are nevertheless reaped, are perhaps worth pondering in these days of our own hot debate over proposed federal aid to education in the United States.

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To continue so earnest a system of instruction beyond the elementary level would, in any program of mass education, cause an enormous number of scholastic casualties. Sugar-coat it any way you like, the fact remains that we don't all have the same talents or mental ability. The answer to these problems in the United States has almost universally been to set standards progressively lower, in order that virtually all who wish may graduate from high school. Just shove them along with their "age group." So an eighth-grade teacher comes up with a class in which some children read as they should, and others are years below par. This constitutes a gross caricature of democracy in education, based as it is on the unspeakable notion that democracy cannot rise above mediocrity.

For Swiss educators, democracy in education is still a matter of equality of *opportunity*, much as it was for Jefferson. The Swiss, in dealing with widely divergent aptitudes under a program of compulsory schooling, have developed their own version of the general European pattern of instruction beyond the elementary grades. At the end of the sixth year, all pupils take a battery of tests, and on the basis of the test scores each family is carefully advised as to what would appear most appropriate in the way of further education for each child. No doors are slammed in the pupil's face—that is to say, he is free to accept or to reject the advice received. But he does have some basis for judging his chances of survival in any of the various types and levels of advanced instruction that are available, and in each of which appropriate standards are maintained.

It is significant that even for the child who moves from elementary school in the direction of a trade or business school, this process of funneling does not imply the prompt abandonment of liberal studies. For instance, special continuation courses are required of those who leave school early to become apprentices; these courses were established primarily for the purpose of assuring further general, rather than vocational, training.

What the system does mean is that after their elementary education, pupils compete with their peers: the less gifted with the less gifted rather than with the potential scholars and scientists who can, consequently, forge on ahead at their own pace. No one is retarded by the drag of those below, no one is frustrated by being out-classed. In other words, there is no Swiss equivalent of our catch-all high school, with its curriculum diluted for the benefit of the mediocre, cluttered with a thousand and one specialized courses, and totally unchallenging to those who are going on to advanced studies. Such a concept would no doubt strike the Swiss as naïve, and perhaps immoral, and certainly undemocratic.

It would be equally naïve to suppose that

one nation could successfully adopt the educational pattern of another, as is. Too many social, historical, and geographical factors are in play to allow the survival of a transplanted educational system. Even so, we might learn many useful things from the Swiss. For example, that discipline and serious work do not damage the young, even in this generation—that there may

even be a relationship between these things and the low rate of juvenile delinquency and crime in Switzerland. That democracy can be served in schools without being equated with mediocrity. That unless we strengthen our school programs promptly and mightily, our children are going to be hopelessly outclassed in the forums and market-places of the world.

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### *Wound and the Wounds*

My belly bears two cuts; the skillful knife  
(I later heard of its clean cutting)  
pierced the skin: the opened flesh revealed  
to one long used to deep malignancy  
only a part to be patched. When I rose  
from bed  
the doctor said, "You'll soon be ten years  
younger."  
I walked from halls of groanings, prayers,  
and eyes  
staring upward in pain, cursing in anger—  
I who had filled the place where brides of  
Christ bent  
over the fearless child and the scared whore,  
I who had entered without fear of hope,  
left without faith, with the neat, miraculous  
scar,  
wondering why the Christians and the Jews,  
hundreds of still novitiates would steal  
time from the Christ, from Moses, or the  
saints  
burnt, beaten, hung—known, unknown,  
would call  
in their long silence a silent sinner's name.

Healed, whole again, after the morning writing,  
reading, and breakfasting on cheese and  
toast,  
weekdays and Sundays, my terrier coaxing,  
waiting,  
I plod the miles of pavement in half-light,  
watch penitents who go to early mass.  
Outside, and often looking in, I feel  
a clutching at flesh, and wonder how the pus  
was dried; and hear a selfless doctor's  
words:  
"Almost a miracle! No grumbling, friend."  
Was that a thought which pierced the skin  
again?  
Why do I think of One born in poor hay?  
So I was told: though fact or fiction, still  
daily I'm moved by Him as by no other.  
My whole world is a world of poetry;  
yet the great bard, or all the saints together,  
re-echo parables. Though walking here,  
I kneel beside His children, by His cross;  
and touch His hem—or is it only breeze?—  
and touch the blood—or are these thorns  
which press  
into my hands that hold my neighbor's rose?  
Home from my journey, swiftly I turn over  
the clever pages, rip my own, and read  
Love's laureate Whose word dies never.

JOSEPH JOEL KEITH