LIBRARIES IN SWITZERLAND

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[Traces the four stages of development of Swiss libraries. Describes the scope and functions of the National Library, scientific libraries, libraries of general culture, special libraries and popular libraries; and the work of the Swiss Association of Librarians.]

Background

The libraries of a country reflect faithfully the peculiarities of its history and its cultural and political life. That is why the Swiss libraries offer certain features which distinguish them clearly from those of our neighbouring countries, though we are bound to them by so many spiritual ties. The linguistic and religious diversity, and vigorous federalism inspired thereby, impress on every library an individual character seen both in the collection of books and in the service to readers. In spite of these differences, our libraries work in close collaboration; for in our small country frequent contacts with one another are both indispensable and easy.

1 Stages of Development

There is no record of any library having at all existed on our soil in the Roman period, especially at Avenches. The history of Swiss libraries begins with the eighth century. It can be divided into four broad periods: Middle Ages, Reformation and Counter Reformation, Epoch of "advancing light", and Modern Epoch.

11 MIDDLE AGES

111 Monastic Libraries

The Middle Ages bequeathed us primarily the convent libraries. First comes the one at St. Gall whose existence has been recognised from the eighth century and which had a plan dated 830. Then follow those of Dissentis (burnt in 1799) and Pfafers, also of the eighth century. Later on, the libraries of Einsiedeln (X cent), Muri, Schaffhouse (XI cent), Engelberg, Hauterive (XII cent), Fribourg (cordeliers), Wottingen (XIII cent), Konigsfelden (XIV cent), and many others were created. We must conjecture though there
is no proof, that the convents of the Roman and Italian Switzerland, such as St. Maurice, Romainmotiers, St. Ursanne etc., and also collected a number of books for their use. Most of these libraries have been destroyed or dispersed, or secularised and incorporated in canton libraries. The most important ones that are still extant are these of St. Gall, Einsiedeln and Engelberg.

112 Secular Library

The only non-monastic library dating from the far-off epoch is that of the University of Basle founded in 1460, although, in other countries of Europe, Renaissance had created a number of libraries of a richer kind. But they were all the work of princes; the Church had no authority over them. We also know of the existence of a number of private libraries like that of Canon Felix Hemmeri of Zurich (XV cent) with a collection of more than 250 volumes which, at that period, was considered very big.

12 Reformation and Counter-Reformation

In the XV and XVII centuries, the progress in printing, the activities of the humanists, the religious struggles of the Reformation and the counter-Reformation helped in the formation of new libraries quite different in composition and aim from those of the preceding epoch. There were, on one side (not to mention the big private collections of Amerbach, Vadian, etc), the first urban libraries of a lay and scientific character founded by bourgeois and private bodies; on the other side, the libraries of ecclesiastical bodies, either Protestant or Catholic, in which the theological element dominated.

121 Secular Origin

Among the first, we find the libraries of the cities of Berne (after 1528), St. Gall (bequeathed by Vadian 1551), the library of the Geneva College (1559), then the library of the City of Zurich, created in 1629 by a private association, and those of Schaffhouse (1636) Winterthour (1660), Zofingue (1693), etc.,

122 Ecclesiastical Origin

To the second category belong, on the Protestant side, the libraries of the Reformed Church of Basle (1529), now merged with that of the University, the Academy of Lausanne (1537), the library of pastors still existing in Neuchatel (1538), and the library of the
company of pastors at Geneva (15...). On the Catholic side, there were the libraries of the Jesuits of Lucerne (1577) and of Fribourg (1580), now incorporated with the canton libraries of these towns; and those of the college (now a cantonal school) at Porrentruy (1592) and of the College of Soleure (1646). Along with the Jesuits, the Capucins were equally very active. Within a century and a half, they created not less than 25 libraries at Locarno-Orselina (1550), Lugano (1565), Lucerne, Soleure and Appenzell (1588), Zoug (1595), Fribourg (1609), St. Maurice (1612), Olten (1646) etc. Under the Helvetian Republic, the greater part of these libraries were added to the public libraries already in existence.

13 Age of Enlightenment

In the XVIII century, after a period of stagnation, a manifest reawakening took place towards 1750 under the influence of the philosophical and scientific movement. New libraries, mostly public, were added to the old ones. They were the ecclesiastical libraries like that of the pastors at Berne (1750), Academy of Theology at Geneva and of the clergy at Schaffhouse (1780); and, the still more numerous ones, the non-ecclesiatical libraries of a general or special nature. Among the first, we have Glaris (1758), Yverdon (1761), Soleure (1764), Bienne (1765), and Neuchatel (1788); among the second, we find those of Zurich Natural Science Society (1746), Berene Economic Society (after 1760), Botanical Institute of Basle (177), etc. It was also the epoch of “cabinets litteraires”, of literary and political study groups, and finally of the first libraries of a distinctly popular character.

14 Modern Epoch

The modern epoch starts with the vast government projects of the Helvetian Republic initiated by the minister Ph. A. Stapfer. He proposed the creation of department libraries and of a national library to be formed out of the existing collections. The downfall of the unitary regime cut short these projects. But the library interest of public bodies had been awakened. During the entire first half of the century we find the States creating the first canton libraries most of them intended for secondary and higher schools, but open also to a wider public: Aarau, Frauenfeld, Coire, Lucerne, Zurich,
Fribourg are examples of the earliest ones. For its part, the Federal Government created in 1849 the Federal Central Library, primarily administrative in character, and in 1855 that of the Polytechnicum. The creation of the National Library was decided in 1894 only, but in a quite different form from what Stapfer had conceived; its scope was limited to the collection of the Helvetica, nearly all the publications appearing in Switzerland or concerning our country either because of authors or of their contents.

2 Present Conditions

21 Quantity

At present Switzerland has more than 6,000 libraries. In 1911, the date of the last general census of libraries, this figure stood at 5,786 of which 2,416 were public libraries and 3,370 libraries were restricted to the members of certain groups. These libraries possessed, in all, some 10 million volumes. Since then, these figures have perceptibly increased, notably by the creation of popular libraries and libraries mainly intended for the working class, maintained by workmen's centres for post-school study. It is difficult to evaluate the total wealth of all our libraries of which the biggest ones possess 400,000 to 1,500,000 volumes; the total can be put at 15 to 16 million volumes.

22 Types of Libraries

If we leave aside the large number of libraries of lesser scope, with a relatively limited range of action, we can classify the Swiss libraries roughly into four broad categories: (1) scientific libraries, (2) libraries of general culture, of study and reading, (3) professional and special libraries, and (4) popular libraries. All these libraries are to a large extent open to the public except some of those in the third category, namely the libraries of scientific institutions or industrial enterprises.

3 Scientific Libraries

All our university libraries along with the National Library, form the first category. They are public-owned. Persons not belonging to universities are admitted as easily as professors and students. The latter only enjoy certain extra privileges in the libraries of their respective institutions. Industry makes good use of their
documentation facilities, especially of the library of the Ecole Polytechnique Federale in Zurich. Thus, our scientific libraries play a primary role in the cultural, scientific, industrial and economic life of the country. They, however, exclude recreational reading and are normally intended for those who have done at least their middle school. The National Library occupies a special place among them. First, it is the only one that puts its collection of books freely at the disposal of every person in Switzerland, whereas the university libraries lend outside their cantons only through the inter-urban lending system which is described later. Next, the National Library does not seek to duplicate the work of university libraries and to be, like them, a library of general sciences. It collects only the Helveticana. In this respect, it tries to be as complete as possible, for two reasons. The first is that in this manner other libraries can avoid taking publications that are not of immediate interest to them, knowing that in case of necessity they will always find them at the National Library. The second reason, and the most important one, is that it is upon its collections is founded its activity, as a National Bibliographical Centre, of publishing the bimonthly national bibliography Le livre suisse and the Repertoire du livre suisse published every five years, which are indispensable to all libraries as well as to book-sellers. Besides, it publishes the Bibliographia scientiae naturalis Helvetica and the Bibliographie des publications officelles suisse, edits the Bibliographie de l'histoire suisse published by the Swiss Historical Society, and collaborates with the Swiss Academy of Medicine in the publication of the Bibliographia medica Helvetica. It furnishes also the Swiss contribution to several international bibliographies.

4 Canton and Municipal Libraries

In the second category, we find the canton and municipal libraries differing greatly in their extent and their collections. Every literate person will find there what he wants and some of them moreover provide also for recreational reading. All of them make it a point to preserve for future generations, the documents that they collect and are naturally more interested in the literature of their respective regions.
5 Professional and Special Libraries

The group of professional and special libraries consists not only of the collections of institutes and seminaries of our ‘hautes ecoles’, but also the libraries often of great importance of industrial and commercial enterprises, as well as of big establishments. It is one of those rare happy effects of the last war in having aroused in these libraries a feeling of solidarity which leads them more and more to integrate themselves in the group of Swiss libraries and lend to every serious seeker the books that often they alone possess.

6 Popular Libraries

Regarding popular libraries we shall say simply that, if the public reading and in particular the ‘adult education’ has not yet attained in Switzerland the same level as in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Countries, it is because we never have like them the possibility of acting from a central authority. But on all sides the efforts are on the increase—for example, the remarkable development of Pestalozzi libraries in Zurich and Neuchatel, the Municipal Libraries of Geneva (which lend nearly 500,000 volumes per year) and Lausanne, the popular libraries of Berne, Basle, etc., and the rural libraries in several cantons. A project of book-mobile is under consideration. Among these libraries there is one that deserves special mention. The “Bibliotheque suisse pour tous” (the Swiss Library for All) was started on the initiative of the Association of Swiss Librarians. Its activities extend over the whole country, like that of the other libraries, in a most happy manner. It hardly lends to individuals, but sends thousands of cases containing recreational and instructive books to privately constituted ad hoc groups, to the factories for workmen, to societies and, last but not least, to members of armed forces. Its work is of very great importance in the struggle against bad literature by an intensified diffusion of good books; besides, it helps those who have not had the benefit of sufficient education to develop their mind in extending their culture and their knowledge, even though they do not have proper libraries within their reach. Half of its budget is met by the Confederation and the other half by voluntary contributions of cantons, communes, and private sources.

7 Swiss Association of Librarians

The diversity of Swiss libraries had not prevented them from
co-ordinating their efforts. In the absence of a common superior authority, they did so on their own initiative, and we are certain that our readers will easily understand that in Switzerland one can get more, and more easily too, by making an appeal to a freely consented discipline than by enactment of legislation. It is the Association of Swiss Librarians (ABS), founded in 1897, which undertook to bring more unity and more coherence in the activities of our libraries. With very modest means, it has achieved remarkable results. It was this which urged in 1919 the creation of the “Swiss Library for All” and also effected the realisation of the Swiss Union Catalogue at the National Library, the central organ for inter-urban lending which actually binds the 350 most important libraries, either by the quantity or nature of collections and which contain today more than two million slips. The activity of this service which receives 30,000 to 35,000 requests per year which is at the same time a centre of bibliographical information, would deserve a special description. The reader of each one of these libraries can obtain without formality and without cost books from all the other; the dispatch of books from library to library is freely carried up to 2kg; it is estimated that nearly 12 million volumes are thus available in one lending system. We will not dwell upon the other achievements of the ABS in the field of bibliography and professional education.

8 Swiss Association for Documentation

Since some thirty years, the ABS is excellently seconded in its work by the Swiss Association for Documentation (ASD) which brings together mainly industrial and administrative libraries and those with special problems.

9 Conclusion

Finally, we may state that Switzerland possesses a network of libraries very efficient and well adapted to our ethnic, political and social structure. If libraries of the type of ‘public library’ of the Anglo-Saxons are not found here it is because that conception does not correspond either to our traditions or to our needs. In the present state the Swiss libraries are fulfilling all the necessary conditions for a vigorous development with the indispensable support they are having from their authorities.