

The Life of a Swiss School Teacher

By Robert Michel

Introductory

AT 49, I am beginning my thirtieth year in the teaching profession. I have been in turn teacher in a small village, then in a large town where I looked after classes of sixteen-year-old girls and boys. At present I am in charge of an open-air school, a type of establishment still little known in our country.

Yet in spite of an already long and varied career, I cannot claim to be able to provide a representative picture of the life of a Swiss teacher. Our small country of less than 5 million people is divided into 25 states or cantons, each of them independent as regards public education. As a result, the training, status, curricula and social activities of teachers may vary substantially from one canton to another and the life of a teacher in a mountain canton may bear very little resemblance to the life of a colleague working in the highly industrialized table-land.

Nevertheless, I imagine that some such differences are to be found in all countries and that there are many dissimilarities between teachers in large cities and those in isolated villages everywhere. Moreover, despite these divergences, it is undeniable that throughout our country the contacts provided by our national teachers' associations, the similarity of their aims and of the difficulties met with, and the presence of a strong national feeling result in the existence of enough characteristics common to all the country's primary teachers to enable me, subject to the foregoing qualifications, to justify the title of this article.

Training

When I ask myself what reasons led me to choose a teaching career, I must admit that there was no question of an undeniable inner sense of vocation, nor of a scientific vocational guidance — this valuable service was still little spoken of thirty years ago — nor even of a seriously considered personal choice. When I entered the Teacher Training School at the age of sixteen, it was by the wish of my parents, who felt that the fees involved in attendance at a secondary school and in a longer course of studies were beyond their modest means.

Thus, like most of my friends of that time, after having had some nine years of primary and upper primary education, I sat for the entrance examination of the Teachers' Training School.

The written part of this examination includes papers in French and arithmetic; the oral part covers the main subjects taught in primary school.

In fact, it is a competitive examination which selects from among the candidates the necessary number of pupils to ensure an adequate supply of primary teachers.

Candidates are recruited from the whole of the canton and mostly come from the middle class, both urban and rural.

Instruction is free and, to those who apply for them, the State grants scholarships repayable, without interest, in a stipulated time after graduation.

The course lasts four years and aims at giving a complete general and professional education. In the course of the last year students do practical work in practice classes attached to the School or in primary classes under the direction of experienced masters. Apart from the usual subjects, instruction is given in psychology, educational method, gymnastics, handwork and music.

At the end of the four years there is a general examination and those passing it receive the official teaching certificate entitling them to teach in public primary classes throughout the canton.

The village teacher

Once he has his certificate, the teacher must find a post. Nowadays, with the scarcity of teachers, this is not difficult. Thirty years ago, on the other hand, there was much competition. For my own part, I lodged my application for a vacancy in a small village where I was competing with 32 other candidates, some of whom had been waiting two years for a position.

Appointments are made by the municipal authorities, that is to say by the Municipality and by a School Committee representing the parents. The introduction of the candidates sometimes occurs in un-

usual circumstances. I remember introducing myself in a village which I did not know at all to each of the members of the selection committee. I found one of them at home, another in the fields, a third in the stable. I was received everywhere with the somewhat malicious friendliness of the peasant, always pleased to have the chance of embarrassing a young man who is new to the game.

The first two years constitute a trial period during which the appointment is only provisional. After this period the post is made permanent and this ensures steady employment. (In some Swiss cantons, the primary teaching staff is elected every four years by the electoral body of the commune. In the main, this unusual system operates to the satisfaction both of the authorities and of the teachers, surprising as this may be to our foreign colleagues!)

For my part, I spent 6 years in a village of 450 inhabitants, amidst a population wholly dependent on agriculture. The school consisted of three classes: an infant class for children between 5 and 6 (non-compulsory), and two primaries, one for children between 7 and 10, the other (of which I was in charge) for those between 11 and 16. There were between 25 and 35 pupils in each class.

It is not easy to give simultaneous instruction unaided, to children of such varied ages and, for example, to conduct 6 different arithmetic classes. Yet such is the lot of most rural teachers, some of whom are in charge of a single class comprising children from 7 to 16.

Centralized upper primary schools exist for outstanding pupils of between 12 and 16. These provide children from several communes with a more extensive curriculum than the primary school, including the study of a foreign language (German in French Switzerland, French in German Switzerland).

Most candidates for the Teachers' Training School, commercial careers and administrative posts are provided by these upper primary schools. None of them has boarding facilities since distances are never so great that pupils are unable to go home each day.

The secondary school, beginning at 10 years, attracts very few village children. Secondary schools, much less numerous than upper primary schools in the country, exist in the chief towns of the district and in all towns of any considerable size.

During these first years of work, I was responsible for teaching in all branches of the curriculum: French, arithmetic, national and biblical history, geography, natural sciences, singing, drawing, gymnastics and hand work, and I realized the full complexity of the young teacher's work and the inadequacy of his professional training. Only experience and a constant effort at self-improvement enable him to master the situation.

Moreover, the village constitutes a special community where everybody knows everyone else and where the new teacher is watched by one and all. It is a little like living in a glasshouse. This hard apprenticeship, however, is one which has its positive sides. I very quickly came to know the parents of my pupils, their work, their worries and their joys and this close contact was a great help in my teaching. The young schoolmaster's job is broadened to include all sorts of outside cultural activities which link him with the community and make him feel that he has a vital part to play. He may be called on to take charge of the local men's or mixed choir, to organize public theatre evenings either with his class or adults' clubs, to help arrange lectures or concerts, to assist with the public library or young peoples' sporting activities, or to act as a local Town Clerk.

It is worth noting that these days the development of means of transport, radio and television, tend to do away with village life as such and to some extent to free the teacher from these outside duties. Unfortunately, this tendency does not always lead to the cultural betterment of the people.

The town teacher

After six years in the country I took an examination which consisted of giving, before a jury and after 10 minutes for reflection two practical lessons required of all candidates. Following this, I obtained a position in the chief town of the canton, a town of 120,000 inhabitants.

This was a complete change, in my teaching duties and in my social life. I was in charge of a class of 35 10-year-olds in a school of 600 boys and girls, and among my pupils I found children who were more wide-awake, as well as more noisy, coming from very varied family environments.

I was quite lost at the beginning, having no contact with the parents, and feeling that I was a total stranger whereas the village had been like one big family.

In towns, the master teaches boys and girls who are all of the same age and who all follow the same curriculum. He looks after them for two or three years and then starts again with a new group. His best pupils go on to the secondary school at the age of 10 or to the upper primary at 11. Thus, by the time they are 12, all have left the primary classes except those who are ill-equipped for study. These require a constant effort on the part of the masters to adapt the teaching to that class of pupils, most of whom, at 16, begin a 3 or 4-year apprenticeship in some sort of manual trade.

The instruction to be given is defined by an official work plan, valid for all primary classes throughout the canton, and clearly setting out the subjects

to be taught and the range. At the end of each year the results obtained are checked by written examinations in French and arithmetic. Only those students about to leave the school take oral examinations on the whole of the curriculum.

Although the framework of the teacher's work is strictly laid down in this way, he yet enjoys considerable freedom in his choice of methods.

The role of teachers' associations.

In this field, he receives useful assistance from the Teachers' Association, whose title of "Pedagogic Society" clearly indicates its basic concerns. Although not in fact a professional union, this association groups almost all primary teachers. It not only vigorously defends our material interests but also undertakes much work in respect of professional improvement.

The Association provides for its members such benefits as a weekly publication, lectures, publishing of valuable educational documentation, and the study and discussion of topics relating to the life of the school and the profession. Thanks to it we remain in touch with researches carried out by Swiss and foreign educationalists, and with new experiments. Through it, teachers can make their views known to the appropriate educational authorities or to public opinion and so make their influence felt in our scholastic institutions.

The teaching certificate does not carry the right to enrol at a university, but it does allow those so wishing to study, without giving up their class, for certain special certificates. These entitle them to teach, at an increased salary, in upper primary schools, in schools for retarded children, or as physical culture or handwork instructors in primary and secondary schools.

An open-air school

Personally, I was interested to teach in an Open-Air School, set up for the benefit of town children selected by the school medical service on account of their poor health.

The school comprises 4 classes with a total attendance of 100. It is located right in the country, half an hour by tramway from the town, at an altitude of 750 meters, in a most beautiful spot surrounded by forests. It is open from April to the end of October, classes being conducted in the town during the winter.

Pupils are taken there each morning by tramway and return home each evening at about six o'clock. The school provides meals at noon and at 4 p.m. and the pupils enjoy excellent climatic conditions.

A large part of the teaching is given in the open air thanks to easily transportable material.

A hour's rest period is provided for each day after the midday meal. Physical culture equipment, a swimming pool and various games are available to the pupils and there are the surrounding woods where, on very warm days, classes or games can be readily conducted.

This type of school, where children have natural and healthy conditions, away from the bustle and noise of the town but without being separated from their families, seems to me to be excellent. The pupils learn to live as a community, to take responsibility and to organize their little society themselves. They have the same curriculum as their comrades in ordinary schools but in more natural surroundings, and in an atmosphere where the educational influence of the teachers is greatly facilitated.

The economic status of the teacher

Thanks to the work of our Association, the economic situation of Swiss teachers may be considered satisfactory. Salaries, still very low when I began, are progressively scaled to the increased cost of living. Thus, an unmarried teacher starts his career with a salary of 10,700 francs and, after 12 years, this is automatically raised to 13,300. The married teacher receives a housing allowance of 600 francs and 300 francs per year for each child. In urban districts, where rents are very high, there are supplementary allowances varying greatly in amount.

These salaries may seem very high when translated into terms of foreign money. Considered in relation to the general level of Swiss life they must be described as average. There are 30 grades of public servants and the primary teacher is in Grade 15. It should be added that 1% is deducted from the above figures for compulsory contributions to the pensions fund and old age insurance and between 8% and 10% for direct taxes.

Women teachers have not yet obtained recognition of the principle of "equal pay for equal work" and their salaries amount to about 85% of those paid their male colleagues.

All primary teachers are compulsorily retired at 60 when they receive a pension of about 55% of their last year's salary.

In the event of a teacher's death, 50% of the pension is paid to his widow and 10% to each of his children until they reach the age of 20.

Social status

What place in society does public opinion accord the teacher? The question is a difficult one to deal

with in a few words and much may depend on his personality.

In a very general way, the teacher feels somewhat isolated. Ever since he left the compulsory primary school, his training has separated him from those who took up commercial, civil service, technical or manual careers. On the other hand, it is certain that the primary teacher is less well thought of than the secondary schoolmaster — who is always a university graduate — and that very often the fact of teaching young children or ungifted pupils strikes

the public, and especially the intellectual class, as lessening his prestige.

That, moreover, is why, along with many other valid reasons, many Swiss teachers are asking for a radical change in their training.

In conclusion, I must say that after a long career I personally find deep satisfaction in my work as a teacher, and that although I entered the profession more or less by accident, I still think it was a happy accident. And I know that the great majority of my colleagues share this point of view.