

The Only Political Boss in Switzerland

George Judson King, in the *Twentieth Century Magazine*

"It is the initiative and referendum that has made Switzerland a democracy. By reason of it the boss has disappeared; there is no bribery and there is no corruption."

So writes an able and honest investigator in a recent issue of a progressive American magazine, and so have written many investigators for many years concerning the Swiss republic. And they have told the truth, save for the invariable exception which proves the rule; for Switzerland has a political boss—just one—who holds the destiny of one canton within the closure of his fat fist. Significantly enough, this canton is the only one which has no initiative and referendum provision in its constitution, but is blessed with "pure representative government" in all its inevitable impurity.

This canton is Fribourg and its master is M. Georges Python. All over Switzerland, whenever I inquired if there was anything akin to a political boss in the country, I was invariably told of M. Python. Also, I was informed, usually without the asking, "But they have no referendum in Fribourg."

Naturally, a desire soon grew up to meet this man so unique in Swiss politics. I decided to make a first-hand study of him and to supplement with exact data the fragmentary information I had secured concerning the conduct of affairs in Fribourg.

M. Python was a difficult man to see. A letter asking for an interview brought no answer. Long distance telephone calls found him "out." Finally, Colonel Emil Frey, of Bern—an ex-president of Switzerland—directed me to Dr. Emil Gross, editor of *La Independent*, a liberal newspaper published in Fribourg, as a reliable man who could furnish me with the detailed information I sought. Thither I went in the hope of finding M. Python in. Fortune favored me. I found that he was at home and would be at his office within an hour. In company with a young professor of philosophy at the nearby university, I sat down to wait. Presently, a portly, well-dressed man, who bore himself like a commanding general, went by and entered the inner office. It was M. Python. While we waited, the young professor imparted to me confidential information evidently calculated to impress me with the greatness of man I was about to meet. "He is master of this canton, which he holds in the hollow of his hand," said he. "Nothing is done unless he first approves—appointments, election of candidates, all legislation—everything! Ah, he is a very powerful and a very clever man. The people have nothing to say—but he helps our university."

I said little and sat listening and thinking. The professor was a splendid young fellow, good-natured, keen, intellectual, with the philosophy of dead centuries packed away in his brain. If he was conscious of the crime against democracy which his story revealed, he did not show it. To be sure, the people were disregarded, but to him the whole situation seemed a good joke. M. Python was a clever man—and—he helped the university.

Suddenly the door opened and the attendant ushered us into the presence of the autocrat. My first thought was, "A typical ward heeler!" Of medium height; heavy-built but not too fat; round head, thick neck, closely cropped hair, sensual face and cold inquiring eyes—he looked the part. He received us formally, as one sure of his power and accustomed to mastery. There was a certain curtness in his manner which warned the visitor to be brief. The professor stated that I was an American investigating the government of Switzerland, and after a few commonplace inquiries, I asked, "What is the voting strength of the various political parties in the canton of Fribourg?"

M. Python, manipulator of elections for twenty-seven years, did not know.

In response to another question he briefly outlined the form of government enjoyed by his canton and ended by stating, not without a certain satisfied air, as though the fact should give distinction to Fribourg in the eyes of an American, that it was the only canton in Switzerland which had no initiative and referendum.

With all the disinterested curiosity I could summon, I asked, "Why?"

Python's manner became most amusing. He shrugged his shoulders, smirked, paused a while and looked at his desk, evidently a diplomatic answer. Finally, discovering it, he raised both hands in the so-so gesture of a Jewish peddler selling goods "below cost," and said, "There has been no opportunity to vote upon the question." Evidently he had forgotten that not two years before 8,500 citizens of the canton had petitioned his grand council to submit this very question to a decision of the voters, and that the petition had never been so much as noticed, because M. Python had said, "No." The people were helpless, since in Fribourg, as in all American states, save three, any constitutional amendment to be submitted must first be approved by the legislature.

Suddenly, with the only trace of vivacity exhibited throughout the interview, M. Python began explaining that there had been no general revision of the constitution since 1857. In fact, the citizens had voted against such a revision and so had indicated that they did not want the referendum. I was left to infer that such a question could be considered only at a general revision.

Here again I recalled that M. Python has always fought any revision, and that while all other cantons of Switzerland have made many changes and improvements in their constitutions during the last fifty years, Fribourg has made only two minor alterations. As far at least as the progressive citizens' not wanting a change I knew there had been one election on the question of a general revision and that it was carried four to one by those who voted, but was declared lost because a beneficent provision of the constitution requires a "majorité absolue" of all the voters necessary to order a revision. Another archaic provision in eleven American constitutions.

M. Python had been wary from the first and evidently the conversation had taken a turn he did not relish. I was about to ask his opinion of the initiative and referendum when he abruptly closed the interview and I was given no further opportunity to ask questions.

Leaving his office, I was soon on my way to see Dr. Gross, the leader of the forces of reform. No greater contrast can be imagined than that presented by these two men. M. Python was a typical boss, iron will, cold heart, cunning brain, convenient memory, secretive and a fighter. He had received me as a possible enemy. Dr. Gross, on the other hand, greeted me with a hearty handshake and a warm welcome. He had a refined face which bespoke an honest heart, and in his eyes burned the world-old fire and devotion of the patriot. A few sentences revealed his grip of facts and the reach of his vision.

"The canton of Fribourg is in a sad plight now," said the editor, "but it was not always so. Fribourg was once free and progressive. From 1847 to 1857 the canton was radical. Then on until 1881 it was liberal. There was a public opinion then, but there is none now, for since 1881 we have had the regime Pythonian which has in twenty-seven years killed all there was of political vigor in the people. This Machiavelli has succeeded in changing the brains of this old free citizenship into a mediocrity which shows a deadly indifference to public affairs. All other cantons of Switzerland are making democratic progress. Even Valais is being modernized. Fribourg alone is condemned to reaction and is looked upon as an old milestone in all free Switzerland—the first nation to deliver itself from the iron heel of European despots."

"But how do you account for the power of this Python?" said I.

"The reasons are many. Perhaps the greatest is through a monopoly of the money market by his absolute control of the two largest banks. A private bank, 'Bank Cantonal,' is controlled by him and through his political power he has had himself made director of the 'Bank de l'Etat,' owned by the canton and established under his regime. He and two of his political tools control this bank, and through these two banks pass all the finances of the canton. Business men, contractors and all who need money

can borrow cheaper of these banks than elsewhere, if they are his supporters politically. Sometimes even no security is asked; only the word. This, you see, insures the backing of the business element.

"Another source of his power lies in the anti-religious character of the opposition up to this time. This he cleverly uses to enlist the support of the priests and prejudice the masses, who are mostly farmers, extremely conservative, a majority of them Catholics. They are largely under the control of the priests, to whom Python is generous. He has helped them build a university here.

"Again, all public officials, whether elected or appointed, are of his choosing. A man whom Python favors is sure of election, but he must 'marcher a la bannette'—that is, 'march by the little stick,' or obey blindly. He selects the university professors and all employees in the various departments of the government and public institutions, down even to the stone cutters on the public roads. There is one single exception: the ground mole catchers are the only officials whose politics are not inquired into. In his appointments, the intelligence, capacity or honesty of the applicant are seldom taken into account. Partisan politics is alone considered. In many offices there are three men employed where one could easily do the work.

"He is adroit in giving fat jobs or positions of honor to members of the leading families of the canton, thus gaining their support or silencing their opposition. Every young man who hopes for position or advancement must look to Python. There are in all between two and three thousand employees of the state and with such a battalion of agents, you can imagine his power, for they are all at his disposal when he wants them on election day!"

"Any special tricks practiced at election time?" I inquired.

"Yes, large crowds of men are imported and kept in hotels and boarding houses the night before election. They are promised jobs if they vote Python's way. A short time previous to election day many more men are employed on the streets and in the public works. There is a by-word here, 'I think we shall soon have an election, as there are so many men on the streets.' Even the university students, no matter where they come from, are allowed to vote for Python. At election time beer and wines are free and Python becomes more charitable, giving food to the poor, and even clothes in some cases.

"Python is an astute politician and often sets his opponents to quarreling among themselves. In this manner he splits their force. Moreover, he gerrymanders the election districts so that it is impossible for the liberals to elect but a few members of the grand council. Still Python welcomes this, as an opposition of some sort is necessary to him."

By this time I was laughing, and the good doctor who had been unfolding the iniquities which weighed so heavily on his heart in all earnestness and sincerity, stopped and looked at me in astonishment.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked.

"It is so like America that I begin to feel at home. The exact methods you describe are practiced in every corner of my country, yet the wise ones say the reason Switzerland has pure government is because of the superior political intelligence and honesty of its people; because it is small; and, again, because there is little wealth, and what we call 'grafting' would not be worth while; still, here in your canton I find what we call a 'political machine'—perfect, even to minute details."

It was Dr. Gross' turn to laugh.

"But tell me," I continued, "what are the results of this regime, and how does Python use his power?"

"Let me answer that by reading some editorial writings in recent issues of *La Independent*. Ah, here is one exactly to the point," he resumed, after running through a file of the paper. "It is entitled 'Caesarism and Consequences.'" Suddenly he looked up and said impressively, "The most fatal consequence of any Caesarism to any civilization is not the money stolen from the people, but the destruc-