NORTH AFRICA SERIES
Vol. V No. 6
(Algeria)

American Universities Field Staff
REPORTS SERVICE

THE ALGERIANS IN SWITZERLAND
An Essay on Freedom

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November 20, 1959

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A golden, autumnal light filtered through the poplars of the Ile de Rousseau, which divides the placid waters of Lake Geneva as they sweep on by to enter the frothing, icy-green Rhone. The small, triangular dot of land, sheltering the pensive figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, hangs suspended out of time and space, separating the two banks of the city, splitting lake from river, and looking up at Europe's highest peaks, whose first snows are now glistening in the wake of the reluctant late afternoon sun. What better place to reflect on the state of man?

Geneva is a fine place for re-thinking: about how much of what is written and said about Switzerland, for example, misses the point. The critique, in fact, has often descended to the cliché-level of the cuckoo-clock, forgetting the extraordinary intellectual vigor of a Zurich when it boasted both Jung and Thomas Mann, the superb quality of Swiss educational institutions and the people in them, or merely the high level of conversation met with in the salons grouping international and diplomatic transients who make Geneva, if not their home, a fascinating stopping-place.

The critique forgets, too, that this is a country of minimal natural resources which through prodigious work, and without the benefit of empire or foreign assistance, has created for itself the

third-highest standard of living in the world, and now boasts the lowest unemployment level in the Western world: 1,018 jobless in October 1959, with more than five thousand vacant positions, in a population of five million. (.05 per cent of the work force as against 5 per cent or so in the United States.) The cuckoo-clock business seems to be booming.

Let us list Switzerland's characteristics frankly. It is clean, honest, sober, proper, polite, reserved, sound, and dull--and most of the synonyms for these to be found in a thesaurus. It stands for all those virtues which a certain part of us wants to possess, an abstraction of the values for which the bourgeois Western world has been striving since Protestant man was first shaped, in part in the very city where this is written. And in natural reaction another part of us, our avant-garde nature, rebels at it and hints that there is something slightly shameful in its austerity and primness. For Anglo-Saxons it has the troubling odor of a Puritan past and for true Latins mésure in this dosage is too strong a medicine. But I am not concerned primarily here with these Western attitudes toward the country. This letter has another point of view; it is Switzerland as seen by non-Westerners.

The Lake Geneva region these days, to look at its transient population, often has the air of being an Oriental principality, if not an Arab one. The hotels, restaurants, sidewalk cafes and streets are full of Middle Easterners, North Africans, Sudanese, Kuwaitis, Iranians, Bahrainis, and, since the breaking of diplomatic relations between the Anglo-French and various Arab countries of the Middle East at the time of Suez, it abounds with Egyptians, Syrians, and Saudis. Muhammad V of Morocco spent a month vacationing here, as does the Emir of Qatar frequently, and Hussein of Jordan is now resting on the lakeshores. But, most of all, the Geneva region has recently been a second Algeria, serving as interim headquarters for various members of the rebel government-in-exile, and as a transit point for Algerians on their way to and from the Arab countries. . .with an unknown number of clandestine sorties into France also involved. Ferhat Abbas, President of the GPRA keeps a residence in Montreux at the head of the lake, and the UGEMA (Union Generale des Etudiants Musulmans Algeriens), after being forced out of activity in France, has its offices in nearby Lausanne, supervising several hundred Algerian students in Switzerland and other European countries.

It was to see some of the Algerians that I came to Geneva originally; to get in touch with UGEMA, learn something of how their students were functioning in a strange environment, and to observe an unusual scholarship project undertaken for their benefit.

This is a project administered by the World University Service, which has its headquarters in Geneva, and underwritten by the Ford Foundation. Briefly stated it provides financial help to a selected group of Algerian students, in an apolitical framework, within France itself and in French-speaking

areas outside of France, i.e. Switzerland and Belgium. The need is obvious, for since the beginning of the Algerian revolt in 1954, conditions of study for Algerians in France have become progressively more difficult. UGEMA was repeatedly raided, its leaders imprisoned or detained without trial, and it was finally banned. Students were subjected to harassment and were investigated by a variety of official and undercover French counterintelligence agencies. Clearly many of them were engaged in politics, some in terrorist activities which they considered to be legitimate patriotic acts. But, whether involved or not, the atmosphere was hardly propitious for academic contemplation, and gradually the number that slipped across into Switzerland became considerable.

As Bernard Ducret, who directs the program for the World University Service said: "They have come here for various reasons: some may have been in actual danger, others thought they were in danger; some, perhaps, simply wanted to get out or to have a change of environment. But they are here, they are qualified to continue their studies, and they will be needed some day by their own people, no matter what the political coloring of the future. It would be shameful to waste this talent when their society has so little of it available at present."

There was at first a good deal of hesitation on the part of the French Government, which insisted that the responsibility for educating Algerians, as Frenchmen, was incumbent on it alone, all the more for study outside of France. But through the good offices of Germaine Tillion, the French ethnologist who wrote a serious study of the economic problems of Algeria (Algerie 57, translated into English as Algeria: The Realities), a compromise was arranged under which financial aid would be given both to groups in France and outside it. A sum of $60,000 was initially allotted for the support of the students in Switzerland, broken down to around $1200 per student over an 18-month period. This meant the availability of scholarships of around $75 a month--little enough to live on at Geneva's American-type prices.

It is UGEMA which submits the dossiers of deserving students to the Service. As far as the latter is concerned there are no political strings attached, although it is more than unlikely that UGEMA will choose anyone who has not been given a clean political bill of health first. The Service then selects the grantees from the submitted list of candidates on the basis of scholarship alone.

It took some time to persuade the Swiss Government of the value of the plan. Switzerland has had a difficult time with respect to the Algerian question on several counts. In keeping with its tradition as a political haven it has given refuge to many Algerians, some under the most exotic passports, and the "summer capital" that Ferhat Abbas maintains in Montreux has raised many hackles in the French press. French accusations against Swiss banks for allegedly underwriting transactions for the covert sale of arms to

the insurgents reached a climax last year with strong attacks against the "evils of banking secrecy." There have been embarrassing cases of espionage involving Swiss officials said to have informed the French Government on Algerian activities in the country; and the shadow of terrorism and counter-terrorism, which have both been unpleasantly blatant in Belgium, and caused several deaths in Western Germany, appeared to Swiss authorities to hang over the country, as more and more Algerians were in temporary residence. But the arguments were convincing, the traditional right of asylum prevailed in the end and the Government accepted the program. As Ducret proudly adds: "There has not been one political incident of any kind involving our boursiers since the program began."

The plan of observation I had went awry. After talking with the World University Service people, and having made plans for interviews with UGEMA in Lausanne, I ran by chance into a friend of mine, a Tunisian labor leader on his way home after having studied the English elections. We had dinner and went to a cafe afterward; as we chatted, the sound of North African Arabic came from a nearby table around which a group of three young men was sitting. After listening for a while it became clear that they were Algerian students, and I suggested inviting them over. After a cool preliminary skirmish they became convinced of the good faith of my Tunisian friend and thawed out; indeed, without the guarantee offered by his presence the whole conversation would have been impossible for I would have been suspect as some kind of agent. It began to occur to me that this was a much better chance for getting spontaneous reactions than in politically-slanted interviews run through the intermediary of UGEMA, for these students knew only that I was an American professor who seemed sympathetic. Of the three, one was studying economics, one social psychology, and the third philosophy. The psychologist, Brahim, was the most eloquent of the trio about everything, but I was struck by his volubility on a subject which had already begun to fascinate me. I asked him at one point what he thought of the country and how he felt in retrospect about his decision to come here. He answered in some detail.

"At first I was afraid, but now I like everything about it. The university is excellent, the professors good. Of course living is expensive and you are not allowed to get a work permit under any circumstances, but we manage to scrape by, between student restaurant meals and doing our own cooking on alcohol stoves. [The three of them had been sharing a coffee by sips before joining us, I had noticed, and pretending by periodic disappearances for the benefit of the management that there was only one person at the table.]

"But the real joy is the freedom one finds here. I had no idea what it was like before. In Algeria when I was small there wasn't any, naturally. But as I grew up and became educated I suspected that it was somewhere in the French tradition and that I could find it in Paris. Yes, I did at first, in the university milieu before all. . .that was up until 1955. There were no real troubles then, even though lots of people looked suspiciously at any

Algerian who was a university student. But at least there were then no early morning searches in your rooms, no slaps or beatings from the police, and you could walk down the street without being stopped for your papers at every block; and no curfew for us 'inferiors' in those days.

"Even then there were other things, though, just as bad for an intellectual like myself. The slights from ordinary people, like bus conductors or grocers; the haughty glances they gave you and most of all the tutoyers [the use of the second person singular form, reserved by the French for non-Westerners]. Perhaps some Algerian manual laborers don't mind it, but it is just not true that we students didn't. I despised it and everyone who used it. I remember a friend of mine whose father was an Algerian deputy in the old Assembly before it was dissolved. We were 'visited' by the police and asked for identification in a cafe off St. Michel [in Paris] and the police kept using the 'tu' form. He simply said: 'Mon père est député; vous employerez le vous avec moi.' [My father is a deputy; you will use vous with me.] He was pushed around and cursed as a cheeky Arab, but he finally won his point. And we will all win it in the end," he added grimly.

Much of what he said is true. Practice too often does not correspond to preaching in France. While there is much merit in the French concepts of liberty and fraternity it is necessary to know the nuances which the French give them in real life. "We have no racial prejudice," they say "and we cannot understand your segregation in the southern states. Here everyone can go everywhere he wants." But French attitudes toward all blacks, including American negroes, are shaped in a politico-cultural framework largely as the result of Black African acceptance of France and her civilization. Being loved platonically and intellectually, the sine qua non to the French, they respond with requited affection. But when the political constellation is not in harmony the prejudices begin to appear. I remember France at the height of the Indochina war in the early '50's when the same refrain now used about the Arabs was in full blast against the Vietnamese: "J'aime bien les noirs, mais je me méfie des jaunes (I like the blacks all right, but I don't trust the yellow people)," said the young French language instructress for foreign students at the Sorbonne. "Ils ne pensent pas comme nous; ils ont une autre mentalité (They don't think like us; they have a different mentality)" was, however, the standard line which serves, by its simplicity and adaptability, the ready-made prejudices of anyone in any situation.

This kind of bland, hypocritical, almost permissive prejudice--which stresses that there are no real barriers or physical obstacles except those self-imposed by the victim who has failed to comprehend the subtler truths of the higher civilization--is not limited to France, although French intellectual arrogance puts a premium on it. It exists throughout much of Europe; I have been aware of it when walking with an American negro friend in Rome and being unconscionably stared at; I have heard it from Spaniards in Toledo who refused to let their womenfolk walk to the nearby plaza for fear of running

into a Moroccan cadet-officer; and England now has its Notting Hill, an even uglier version. It raises the question as to why, if we accept the statements of the Algerian students, it should be absent in Switzerland.

There are several hypotheses. For one, prejudice may not really be absent completely; only relatively so. And for those who have suffered its sharpest bite, this relativity is bliss. Another is that integration on any level into Swiss life is much more difficult than in most other countries (although to destroy another myth in part, I found myself on one occasion many years ago taken into a bourgeois Swiss-German family with the warmest of welcomes on short acquaintance) and thus the isolation of the outsider protects him from real or fancied slight.

Perhaps, however, in the case of Switzerland--and of Scandinavia, where, according to a considerable body of non-Western testimony, the same phenomenon is found--the absence of prejudice is linked with the absence of guilt. The colonial and ex-colonial powers of Europe carry a heavy spiritual burden, regardless of the now fashionable dogma which seeks to excuse the past by counting the bridges and ten-cent stores which have been built in areas under their control. For they have recklessly played God by changing irrevocably the lives of all those with whom they have come in contact. It makes no difference that, given the impetus of the West, the change would have come about in some other way or at some other time. They were the engineers of the change, just as Americans were in importing slaves from Africa, and the responsibility is branded in deep. So it may be that the Swiss, because they feel pure--or because they can convince themselves that they are pure, for obviously in the end they cannot dissociate wholly from what the West has wrought as a unit--can strike an attitude neither overbearing in its need for atonement and forgiveness, or defensive in its need for justification.[1]

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1 An excellent example of complicity in justification is at hand while this is being written--an article in The Times of London that gave the background facts on the Belgian Congo as follows:

> "History. -- The Congo has been described as a personal creation of King Leopold II and his collaborators. The King was one of the first to recognize the possibilities of the area after H. M. Stanley had reached the mouth of the Congo in 1877. After the King had been recognized as sovereign head he established a system of personal union. Since 1908, when a bill was passed ceding the territory from the King to Belgium, the Government and administration of the Congo have been in the hands of the Belgian government."

Not a word about what really happened in the Congo for the generation of readers who will never hear of the massacres, the forced labor, the scandals that led to an international investigatory commission. Who is rewriting history for whom?

And it may be that because of this, Switzerland has a role to play in the philosophic relationship between the West and the rest of the world which is bound in the long run to become more crucial than rivalries between competing economic systems.[2]

Brahim went on:

"I feel that there is an ultimate freedom here, as far as we are concerned: to be ourselves. Not to be looked down on is fine, but not even to be looked at is more important; looked at because I am brownish and have curly hair, or because some of us look poor, are badly dressed, or speak French with a strong accent; not to be listened to when we are together speaking Arabic." I thought how a similar conversation in Paris would have sent prying glances our way and now, with terrorism possibly striking anywhere, would have caused most people to move away to a convenient distance. "My landlady in the almost one year I have lived with her has never once mentioned, after the first day, that I am Algerian, or asked why I am here, or how I came, or what I think of the revolution, or anything. I am just a roomer who says 'Good day' and a few pleasantries, and that is what I want to be."

It struck me that this might be the key, as we sat silent for a bit, watching the evening crowd strolling in a fine drizzle, while most of the cafe habitués sat talking quietly, playing chess or cards, or reading from the rack one of the several top-notch newspapers this country boasts. Geneva in all its manifestations--its Rousseau, its tradition of humanitarianism with the Red Cross, its international floating population, its first, faltering but noble attempt at world organization with the League of Nations, even with its Calvin and the excesses of his 16th-century rigor--has always been a site for the expression of true individuality in our world. It is conducive not to the flamboyant individuality of Left Bank Paris, nor to the egoism of the Latin world, which so quickly collapses into personal anarchy in the Arab countries, but to a sober assessment of the human being as a personality with the inner right to be different from all others and not to be judged as a type.

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2 We should consider the gloomy possibility that prejudice is built into the Western way of life, founded as it is on two pillars: 1) the assumption of superior religious truth derived from intolerant monotheisms, whether they be Christian, Jewish, or Muslim; and 2) the assumption of superior lifeways in the secular field as the result of the development of modern Western man since the Renaissance. When the two are combined they produce arrogant prejudice; when they are split, as is the case with Islam which must square technically inferior modern lifeways with alleged religious predominance, they produce internal frustration and rage-xenophobia. Can we honestly say that the basic spirit behind the export of the Jesuits, 19th-century missionaries, Point-4 experts, and Smith-Mundt professors (not to mention American Universities Field Staffmen) is not all the same?

This spirit is camouflaged by a self-effacing dourness and impersonality, but it is precisely this impersonality which has permitted the flowering of the individual within these reasoned limits. There may not be a high proportion of geniuses in Switzerland, but there is a very low proportion of duds. And so far as the foreigner is concerned, a very decent bargain is struck. Since the Swiss are not neurotically disturbed about being loved, like Americans, or preoccupied with their uniqueness, like the English and the Japanese, or obsessed like the French with their cultural mission, they respect the stranger as an equal, and offer him the chance, as a guest, to expand in his own way so long as he does not intrude upon them. Just as your life is private, so are theirs; it is an honest hospitality for an honest price.

Finally, said Brahim, what is missing in Switzerland, in comparison to France, is the "pride" as well as the "prejudice." "La Suisse romande est pour moi plus humaine que la France parcequ'elle ne parle toujours pas de 'gloire' et de 'prestige.'" (Roman Switzerland is no more human than France for me because it doesn't always talk about glory and prestige.)

The group broke up a little later and I went back to my hotel. I listened to the radio for a while, there was a round-table discussion on "Tropical Medicine" and then the station signed off. . .without playing an anthem. This may not seem unusual to Americans but it is remarkable among the state broadcasting systems of Europe. I thought that if I, the citizen of a great, secure power noticed it with a kind of approval, how much more noteworthy it must have been to someone struggling to break the crushing embrace of European nationalism which has not only used national anthems to stimulate mass emotion (it is dismal to realize that men can be more easily moved to tears in our time by the "Marseillaise" or its counterparts than by a late Beethoven quartet) but has taught many of the newer nationalisms the same tricks.

If, as has been said, Michelangelo and the Renaissance had to be paid for by the Borgias, then the cuckoo-clocks and much of the quaintness of Switzerland may be the price for the freedom which the Algerians said they were finding here. The Borgias and the clocks need be no more than the curiosities of history, but the 20th-century world needs both the Renaissance and the Swiss concept of human values.

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