

He Deals in Cabbages and Culture



Culture peddler Duttweiler.

by Edgar May

IN SWITZERLAND there's a merchant who has startled American businessmen by featuring, next to butter and beans, such sidelines as books and Beethoven. Acknowledged as Switzerland's supermarket king, Gottlieb Duttweiler explains such strange combinations as an effort "to build a better world starting in the kitchen."

Hardly a cloud-floating dreamer, Duttweiler has anchored his lofty ideals with business ropes that would be the envy of a J. P. Morgan. He keeps vigil on 345 stores, 100 trucks that are rolling groceries, and more than 10,300 employees who run his nation-wide enterprises. Duttweiler also superintends a myriad of un-grocerylike activities that have made him unique as a food merchandiser.

For example, he runs an adult-education program with various courses including cooking classes for bachelors. The largest night school in Switzerland,

it attracts 6,000 students weekly in the language division alone!

Duttweiler's book club, Ex Libris, is the biggest in the country and sells 350,000 volumes annually, while the club's record division distributes almost a half-million discs a year. "Dutti" and his assistants arrange concert series that have featured such American stars as violinist Yehudi Menuhin and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. And for vacation-minded citizens, he offers economy holidays that include language courses at resort hotels.

Add to these "sidelines" a film company, two newspapers, a mountain railway, and a Zurich clubhouse for oldsters, and you have an idea how far afield "Dutti" has gone since 1925 when he started his grocery business with borrowed capital and five Ford Model T trucks.

While most of these activities are self-supporting, some, like the concert series, have to be subsidized. One percent of the gross grocery turnover — about \$1,500,000 annually—keeps culture going.

As one of his associates explained: "Dutti doesn't measure success in terms of money, but what he can't stand is inactivity whether it's in material or people." After World War II, when his fruit buyer reported wide unemployment of young people in Italy, a typical Duttweiler reaction ensued:

Aware that many Swiss housewives were unable to find maids, his organization approached the Italian and Swiss Governments, got yards of red tape cut, provided medical examinations for 2,500 girls, and arranged for Swiss clergymen to supervise them. Within months, Italian unemployment was eased a bit and the Swiss maid problem was solved!

Even Duttweiler's competitors are impressed with his "big business" approach. Last Fall, shortly after the Russians launched their Sputniks, he had not been seen around Zurich for a few days. A rival merchant was quick to explain:

"Duttweiler? Oh, he's negotiating for supermarkets on the moon!"

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