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REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR
REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON PROGRESS IN THE STANDARDIZATION
OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE FOURTH CONFERENCE

Report by Switzerland**

Paper submitted by Switzerland

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5th Conference of the United Nations on the Standardization of
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Report by Switzerland

Introduction

Switzerland presented a report on the collection and treatment of geographical names in Switzerland to the First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names at Geneva 1967.¹⁾ It is our intention to review briefly progress in this field in Switzerland during the last 20 years. We shall especially consider those recommendations that refer to national activities.

National Geographical Names Authority

Such a national committee has not been established so far. A decree issued by the Federal Council²⁾ assigns the right to establish principles for the collection and the spelling of geographical names to each of the 25 individual cantons. With very few exceptions all of them have their regional committee on geographical names as requested by the above federal decree. They have to decide on the principles concerning name collection and orthography on a regional bases. The Federal Directorate of Cadastral Surveys (Department of Justice and Police) has to approve these principles and is the responsible institution that has to supervise these cantonal names authorities.

Besides this office various other governmental organizations are involved in the standardization of specific groups of geographical names: The Federal Office of Topography (Department of Defense) treats all names that appear on the National Map Series and are not yet ruled by the cantonal committees and those geographical entities that extend beyond a single canton. The Federal

1) Document F/CONF.52/L.89:
Relevés et traitement des noms géographiques en Suisse. Préparé par
E.Spiess, E.Schulé et A.Bleuer

2) Bundesbeschluss über Orts-, Gemeinde- und Stationsnamen vom 5. Februar 1954

Department of Energy and Traffic approves names of railway and bus stations, the Federal Department of the Interior publishes regularly the official list of the names of all 3024 communities. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs edits every year a list of the names of foreign countries in French and German.

Responsibilities are therefore legally divided among 5 of the 7 federal ministries what will make it extremely difficult for a national geographical names authority to function as an interdepartmental co-ordinating committee and to fulfill their tasks on a national level.

International Co-operation

International co-operation is considerably hindered by the lack of a national committee. Representatives in expert groups have to be recruited on an optional bases. Delegates have no other financial support but of their own institution.

Nevertheless Swiss representatives participated whenever possible in the meetings of the Dutch- and German-Speaking United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and in those of the "Ständiger Ausschuss für die Schreibweise geographischer Namen in deutscher Sprache". Their activities have been supported as far as possible under these unfavorable circumstances.

There have been established contacts also with the Romance languages Group of the UNGEGN, in view of the fact that 29% of all our inhabitants are of french, italian or rheto-roman language.

Treatment of names

Names are currently collected and located in the course of the cadastral survey in each community. The cantonal nomenclature commission verifies them and decides on their spelling. Local names are registered in high density for about 60% of the Swiss territory. These name files have however not been published.

Only a minor part of all these geographical names are reported on the 250 sheets of the official maps at 1:25 000, three to five names per km². This map series therefore contains some 180 000 names for the whole country.

Publications

A gazetteer with all these names has not been published so far, because there is no urgent demand for it. Some consideration is given to an concise gazetteer for Switzerland in connection with a computer-based name data base.

There are two publications that can serve as an intermediate form of a gazetteer:

- 1) Amtliches Gemeindeverzeichnis der Schweiz / Liste officielle des communes de la Suisse / Elenco ufficiale dei comuni della Svizzera / Bundesamt für Statistik / Office fédéral de la statistique / Ufficio federale di statistica, Bern / Berne / Berna, 1986. 203 S.
- 2) Neues Schweizerisches Ortslexikon / Nouveau Dictionnaire Géographique de la Suisse / Nuovo Dizionario Geografico della Svizzera. Verlag / Edition / Edizione C.J. Bucher GmbH, München und Luzern. 23. vollständig neubearbeitete Auflage, 1983, 347 S.

Reduction of the number of exonyms

Generally speaking maps for international use produced in Switzerland show the official names.

Exonyms are used to some extent in newspapers, in television, on traffic signs and in atlases for educational purposes. A slight decrease of the number of exonyms can be observed, but it seems absolutely impossible to accelerate this process by official means.

On a local level, especially along the language borders, there is quite naturally a remarkably strong tendency of language minorities to maintain their exonyms.

Lists of exonyms for the four national languages have not yet been published.

Education in toponymy

The problems of standardization of geographical names are part of a course

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in basic cartography for surveyors and geographers each year at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich. There is also a biannual optional course in toponymy, given by a linguist.

