

Letters from Switzerland

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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

Put your own house in order!

When God had finished creating the first SWISS, he was pleased with his work and told him that he could have three wishes, which would all be granted. "Beautiful mountains" was the first, and "luscious meadows with healthy cows giving good milk" the second one. At this point God enquired whether the milk was really good. "Delicious", said the SWISS, "but do try for yourself", handing God a tumblerful. Having tasted it, God finally asked what the third wish was. "One franc twenty for the milk" was the reply.

This story, which refers to a certain covetousness as part of the Swiss make-up, has been told by the Swiss radio when it announced that Berne was granting 300,000 francs for improving Switzerland's image in Italy. It appears that the Italian media have taken to running fairly bitter stories about the Swiss in general, but in particular with reference to Seveso, to the affair of Chiasso and to alleged bad treatment and hundreds of thousands of Italian workers receive in Switzerland. (If they are really so badly treated, it is beyond my comprehension that they still come in such numbers!)

At any rate: Berne is granting 300,000 francs to those bodies which usually have the task to put Switzerland into its best light. They are "Pro Helvetia", which mainly looks after the cultural side, and the "Swiss Travel and Touring Association", which occasionally invites foreign journalists to extended visits in Switzerland.

Whether taking foreign journalists up to the Jungfrauoch and showing them some beauty spots as well as factories, apart from wining and dining them and, to crown it all, making them meet one of our seven Federal Councillors — whether all this is the best way to change an apparently existing anti-Swiss atmosphere in Italy, remains to be seen.

Yet another question would be what Italy's image in Switzerland comes to at present. What with corruption, kidnappings, banditry, gangsterism, smuggling, a never ending crime wave and a near-dissolution of the authority of the state being part of the scenery, it would seem to me that if any image needs polishing it would be the Italian one.

If, I would suggest, the Italian media keep running stories about the "covetous Swiss", these may well be deliberate attempts at diverting Italian public opinion from the truly shocking and shameful state of affairs in their own country. The 300,000 francs could, I think, be used for a better purpose.

It strikes me forcibly that the (German and Swiss German) language one reads and hears of late in Switzerland is getting progressively rougher. This observation applies — at least partly — to the mass media and in an even more pronounced manner to young people down to the age of about ten and even below.

Whereas some writers in newspapers think it smart to use sloppy language — for example instead of talking about "political events" they would talk about "politevents" or "politmeetings" etc., to mention just one example which can be easily translated. While this sort of thing is rather irritating, the altogether too free use of words which may conceivably be current in establishments where ladies of easy virtue practice their horizontal trade — and in other even less mentionable places — shows a marked deterioration in linguistic style and taste. This, of course, appears to people of the older generation to be truly shocking.

During World War Two some officials in Whitehall developed a linguistic style of their own which became known as "Whitehallese." It irritated the then Prime Minister Winston Churchill so much that he once sent a memorandum round Whitehall which read: "Whitehallese is language up with which I will not put. Please use English henceforth."

Unfortunately the parents of some present day Swiss schoolboys I know do not seem to tell their youngsters that some of the expressions they so freely use nowadays are part of a language, "up with which they will not put." The vocabulary I am referring to is neither particularly descriptive, nor is it in any way amusing or to the point, but is merely unattractive and often quite revolting.

The old English lesson for after-dinner speakers — that a good after-dinner speech should be like a beautiful girl's bikini, for it should be brief enough to be interesting, yet

long enough to cover the subject, was at least an amusing allusion. But some of the sayings one hears nowadays from Swiss youngsters are just foul language.

I have had an opportunity of discussing this problem with some adults. They think that it is best to let their youngsters use whatever language they fancy, rather than forbidding the use of certain words, because, they feel, it may in time become quite uninteresting for their children to use language which tends to shock. This, I fear, is a somewhat dangerous theory, as I think it unlikely that foul words will eradicate themselves from a vocabulary one has got used to. One need be neither oversensitive nor an old fuddy-duddy to be concerned about a marked deterioration in the standard both of the written — and above all — the spoken word at present noticeable in some — there are, of course, exceptions — mass media and particularly amongst the younger generation in Switzerland.

BASEL – NEW HOTEL

Hotel Birsbrugg has been opened in the Basle suburb of Birsfelden. Situated in a quiet but central position, the hotel can be reached in six minutes from Basel's main station, or in 10 minutes from the Industries Fair centre. All 24 rooms have private bath, shower & WC, minibar-refrigerator, radio, telephone and colour TV connection. Businessmen can use the hotel's telex. A speciality restaurant and a brasserie complete this small hotel which has been built in typical American colonial style.

Address:
Hotel Birsbrugg
4127 Birsfelden-Basel/Switzerland
Tel: (061) 41 36 36
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GO FOR (W)INTERNATIONAL SWITZERLAND

It is 115 years ago since the first party of British visitors toured Switzerland on holiday. Even in those days, the Swiss made them feel at home, perhaps with a careful eye to the future, but the shrewd Swiss could not have foreseen the day when their country would become one of the most tourist-minded in the world. Still less could they have forecast that by the middle of the twentieth century, Switzerland would enjoy almost three quarters of the winter sports traffic from Britain.

Reasons are not difficult to find. Geographically Switzerland is ideally situated just 90 minutes from London's airports. It has a greater abundance of the slopes necessary for ski-ing. Climatically it is ideal, with plenty of the right type of snow and pleasant winter sunshine when the snow clouds have gone. Above all, the lessons of a hundred years have been well learned, and the nation is geared to provide exactly what the visitor requires.

In his charming book "Switzer-

land for Beginners", George Mikes claims that the most gruelling winter sport is the avoidance of ski-ing. For the temptation to ski is with you wherever you go in Switzerland — and to resist it calls for exceptional grit and endurance . . .

Like most of Mikes' paradoxes, this one is not without foundation. Holiday time is precious, and a skier's legs are best employed in bearing him downhill rather than trudging upwards. With this in mind, Swiss resorts introduced a whole range of innovations in uphill transportation. A number of new installations have been added to the 1,500 ski-lifts, chairlifts and aerial cableways already at the disposal of winter sports enthusiasts in all regions of Switzerland.

These devices are to be found in the 200 Swiss winter sports resorts, many centres boasting more than 30 of them. In the Valais, for example, Verbier has no fewer than 33, plus 25 in neighbouring resorts, included in one single season ticket. But apart

from the thrills of the *piste* now so easily accessible, other less strenuous joys await you in Switzerland, whether you spend your holiday in a modern resort or in a peaceful village off the beaten track: occasions such as a leisurely sledge ride behind tinkling bells or an excursion on snow-shoes through spruce forests and across virgin snow-fields. There are, of course, other amenities available for skating, tobogganing, ski-bobbing and swimming, to name but a few.

Excellent money-saving seasonal transport tickets are available at all the wintersport centres, large and small. Various combinations allow the visitor to work out the best value for money. This is particularly important when one comes from a country with weak currency. For this reason, the news that most of the member hotels of the Swiss Hotel Association have decided not to increase their rates for 1979, for the sixth year in succession is more than welcome.

"THE COUNTRY MANSION OF WALDBUEHL"

This is the English title of a new book, contribution to the History of Art of Switzerland, volume 4, by Katharina Medici-Mall.

Occasionally art too allows itself an irony: one of the finest English country mansions is to be found in Switzerland! In the years around 1900 the dwelling-house was the principal building type of an architecture that still aspired to be "art". In 1907-1911, therefore, the industrialist Theodor Bühler commissioned M. H. Baillie Scott to build and furnish his country house and garden in Uzwil. There was no Swiss at the time to equal Scott, who, with Voysey and Mackintosh, was the most prominent architect and designer of the Arts and Crafts movement. This reforming movement, instigated by Ruskin and Morris, confronted the industrial design of the nineteenth century with artistic handicraft, thus paving the way for the Art Nouveau and thereafter the German *Wekbund* and the *Bauhaus*.

The country house Waldbühl is not only Scott's masterpiece, the quintessence of his art, but is also the best preserved of all Scott's houses. This monograph draws upon the plentiful source-material to provide an account of the relationship be-

BOOK REVIEW

tween architect and client, the planning and the building history of the house. Comparisons between Scott's work and Swiss villa architecture complete the text, which is supported by numerous illustrations. Peter Meyer writes in his preface to the book: "The house at Uzwil was built at a moment in time which may be considered a pivotal point in architectural history, a fulcrum between tradition and technical modernity. It is highly commendable that a work of such great historical value should at last have become the object of a detailed study and appreciation".

The book has 180 pages, 5 colour photos and about 170 one-tone pictures, as well as 2 folded double pages. The format is 22.3 x 27.7 cm. The text is in German and English. Price Fr. 83. The book is published by the Gesellschaft für Schweizerische Kunstgeschichte, Bern 1979. It may be had from any book seller.

ECHALLENS — FESTIVAL OF WHEAT AND BREAD

The country market town of Echallens, between Lausanne and Yverdon, was the scene of the "Festival of Wheat and Bread". The programme included events such as folklore markets, vocal performances and, in August and September, six musical plays produced by Charles Apothéloz. Various exhibitions illustrated the story of wheat and bread in changing times.

SEEING THE NEUCHÂTEL JURA WITH THE "WEEKEND TICKET"

After bringing out the postcoach season ticket and the Sion, Upper Valais and Toggenburg weekly tickets, the latest season ticket which the postcoach services are offering is the "Weekend Ticket" in the Neuchâtel Jura. This general ticket for excursions, walking and, in winter, travel to cross-country skiing trails, entitles holders to two days (Saturday/Sunday) of unrestricted travel on eight postcoach routes totalling 90 miles in the Jura region of Canton Neuchâtel.

A typical recommended walk would be from La Brévine to Lake Tailères. Or again, there is the tour along the River Doubs, from Les Planchettes up on the high ground down to the River and then into the romantically wild area near Maison Monsieur. For adults the "Weekend Ticket" costs Sw.Fr. 10 and for children and holders of the general or half-fare season tickets, Sw.Fr. 5. It can be purchased on board the postbus.