

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

The late Federal Councillor Giuseppe Motta, for many years in charge of Swiss Foreign Policy and Diplomacy, is on record as having written in 1922 (in a letter to the then Federal President Haab) "As you know I have never been one of those who attributed exaggerated importance to the reports of our Envoys. The Press, with its circulation and speed of information, nearly always informs more comprehensively and sometimes better than our official informants".

This was an astounding evaluation most professional diplomats would be shy to make — an admission coming from a Minister of Foreign Affairs which to a certain degree devalues the whole costly machinery of diplomatic representation.

Federal Councillor Motta wrote this from Genoa, where he attended an international conference and while it is known that he studied the official reports of the envoys most carefully (and annotated them) it is also known that he was a very ardent student of several organs of the daily press, both Swiss and foreign. Whether he believed the often quoted pun that "diplomats are people who report, belatedly and disguised as top secrets, stories which have long ago been published in the press" is not known. But, as Mr. Motta obviously valued press reporting highly, it may be worth examining what kind of sources of information are at the disposal of a representative of the Swiss press in a capital like London.

1. There are, as one's raw material, as it were, the media — press, radio and TV — which in Britain inform extremely quickly, and in many cases, also reliably. Nevertheless, information gleaned from one of these sources, should, if ever possible, be checked for accuracy before passing it on.

2. The sessions in the Houses of Parliaments and the official parliamentary reports contained in Hansard must be listed as a very important source of information.

3. Much information can also be obtained through good contacts with the Press Officers in the most important Ministries and foreign Embassies as well as good relations with colleagues in Fleet Street.

4. The Central Office of Information — this very valuable peacetime successor to the wartime Ministry of Information — often arranges excursions and information visits to

nationalised or private industries. . . .

5. When elections draw near attending political meetings in various camps can prove to be an extremely fruitful exercise . . .

6. It can be useful to be friendly with a newsvendor, a taxi driver, a hairdresser or a particular publican or car park attendant, for the famous "man in the street" often knows more than what one can learn from cocktail party gossip.

Some of the sources of information mentioned (and the list is by no means comprehensive), — but not all of them — are at the disposal of the diplomats as well. They enjoy, incidentally, access to a higher level of officialdom than press representatives usually have. But on the other hand, while the latter usually report daily or even several times per day, the former report much less frequently. This puts the former at a disadvantage but by way of compensation they have much more time to formulate their messages and can do so with more care.

Messages which are not written for publication and which do not cover the topical events of the day can review the developments in a guest country from a different angle and are more in the nature of historical reviews than the kaleidoscopic description of daily events can ever be.

It goes, in conclusion, without saying that the best and most comprehensive information is obtained by as close a co-operation as possible between the diplomats on the one and the representatives of the press on the other hand. During my long years as a press man in London I found it extremely fruitful to frequently exchange news and views with most of the Swiss envoys. One of them, however, used to forget that an exchange of information can only exist if both sides consider it a two way traffic. When one met him, he tried to draw one out while himself behaving like an oyster. Fortunately he was an exception amongst the nine Swiss envoys who were Chefs de Mission during my London years.



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