

# Letter from Switzerland

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## LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

In your last letter you ask how I, as an American, feel living in a country as small as Switzerland. First of all, it's somewhat fallacious to think of the country as being small, despite what the geography books may say and despite the innumerable—and sometimes even humorous—stories on the subject. Every student of Swiss-American relations knows that Switzerland is about three times the size of Connecticut or the equal of two Massachusettses, while others like to consider it half the size of Maine. Why all these comparisons are limited to the New England states is the subject of some conjecture among Americans living here, but the consensus has it that Connecticut and Massachusetts are two names even the Swiss cannot pronounce correctly, with Maine simply thrown in for good measure. This is perhaps unfair to the Swiss, for they are certainly the most gifted linguists one is likely to meet up with, their own Swiss-German language excepted, of course.

Swiss-German is unquestionably in a category of its own, but not everyone dislikes it immediately—some realize only later how strange it really is. I remember my first day in Switzerland, quite a few years ago. A friend had located a room for me in a small pension near the university in Zurich. That first day, at breakfast, a young man, who was studying at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, looked at me with sleepy eyes and asked me if I could pronounce the word "Chuchichäschtli". I replied that I was not acquainted with Arabic and hadn't come to Switzerland for any purpose other than seeing the country and learning German. "That is German", my student friend countered, beaming a smile of victory mixed with strawberry jam. "Chuchichäschtli", he went on to explain, meant "kitchen cabinet" in Swiss, and it was a very important term. I disclaimed any interest in politics so early in the morning, and tried to change the subject by remarking how good the rolls and coffee were. He said that Swiss rolls were *always* good and that Americans, as far as he knew, were all as naïve as I. He added that "Chuchichäschtli" was *the* word, the absolute ultimate in words with which the Swiss plays his favorite game with Americans, a game called "Pronounce Me if You Can." "Oh", I remarked, "please forgive my ignorance. Allow me to make a stab at your favorite word!" And out it came: "Xhruckiplaster!"

His face turned pale, then beet red. He began shaking from the ankles to the top of his head, and soon he was bellowing out the most amused laughter I have ever heard. "Haw, Hew, Haw", he wheezed. "Chukeecaskly", I said hopefully, but his laughter only increased in intensity. I became panicky. "Custardcashly", I quickly offered. "Crashpervesply", "Cookiewasher", "Caspergustly", "Raspervestly". By now, three other house guests had entered and were quietly witnessing a scene they had probably observed at least ten times before. With a last desperate gasp, realizing that I was an unofficial repre-

sentative of the United States of America in a foreign country, I sighed, "Chuchichäschtli".

Silence reigned over the breakfast room. Frau Böschli, our landlady, who was just bringing in a fresh pot of coffee, stopped and stared. What had I done, had I insulted one and all of them? Was there some Swiss custom—some quaint bit of etiquette—I had breached? Was I to be banished from this country which I was just beginning to like? My fears were quickly allayed when the student engineer, smiling from ear to ear and looking no worse for wear following his terrible attack of laughter, stood up and tipped an imaginary cap to me.

"Young man", he said, "you have passed the test with floating colors, as you say in America." "What test", I wanted to know. "You have mastered the password, you have acquitted yourself with dignity and aplomb. You have become one of us, one of the noble breed who founded the Confoederatio Helvetica in the year 1291. To you, sir, our heartiest congratulations for having pronounced 'Chuchichäschtli' correctly—exactly as a Swiss would have."

I started to say that it was only an accident, but I realized that such an admission would have spoiled their entire day. "Thank you", I said instead, "I'm proud to be in Switzerland." Frau Böschli, who hadn't uttered a word until now, said, "He speaks 'Chuchikäschtli' like a Basler—and they're not Swiss, not one of them is a Swiss!" "Basler or no Basler", said the man who had started the whole kitchen-cabinet business, "he's one of us, and we'll see to it that his Swiss education continues in the spirit in which it started."

I was glad to have made so lasting an impression upon these kind people, all of whom had been complete strangers only a few minutes earlier. "Chuchikäschtli" proved to be more than a password. It was evidence that I feared nothing in Switzerland, that I experienced no innate feeling of horror at the prospect of speaking Swiss-German. I didn't know it then, so long ago in Frau Böschli's breakfast room. Switzerland, you see, is a small country in many ways that one would least suspect. It isn't small because it comprises only 15,950 square miles—three times the size of Connecticut or the equal of two Massachusettses. It isn't small in that sense at all, for most of those square miles are up and down, and somebody once said that if you flattened out Switzerland with a rolling pin, it would be about the size of the Soviet Union. No, if Switzerland is small in any aspect it's because of the fierce pride of her people, these descendants of the Helvetian tribes and the Roman legions. Unbeknownst to me, I had tickled that pride and catered to the Swiss desire to be liked, to be recognized for what they are. I had done all this—and it proved a valuable lesson for everything that would follow—by pronouncing one small word correctly. And in all the years that followed, I was unable to do it again.

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### KUNST DER SCHWEIZ UND DES AUSLANDS

Eine ansehnliche Zahl von Talenten, die selten Gelegenheit haben, öffentlich hervortreten, wird man in *Wädenswil* am Zürichsee vom 2. bis 24. Oktober in der grossangelegten Jahresschau der Künstler von Zürich-Land mit neuen Arbeiten vertreten sehen. Ebenso zeigen Maler und Bildhauer des Jura vom 2. bis 17. Oktober ihre Werke in einer Biennale in *Moutier* im Berner Jura. In Genf eröffnet einer der bedeutendsten Maler der Westschweiz, Adrien Holy, am 29. Oktober seine vielseitige Werkschau. In *Bern* dauert die Ausstellung von Walter Linck und Rolf Iseli

noch bis zum 17. Oktober. – Internationales Ansehen geniesst die feingearbeitete Kunst des italienischen Malers Giorgio Morandi. Seine intimen Stilleben werden vom 22. Oktober an in der Kunsthalle *Bern* ihren Zauber entfalten. Künstlerisches Gestalten wird in vornehmer Form auch in der Jahresschau «Montres et Bijoux» in *Genf* zu bewundern sein. Diese strahlende Präsentation von Edelerzeugnissen der Präzisionstechnik und des werkkünstlerischen Geschmacks ist so reich ausgebaut worden, dass sie (vom 1. bis 24. Oktober) die Säle des Musée Rath zu beherrschen vermag.