

Letter from Switzerland

Autor(en): **Epstein, Eugene V.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Die Schweiz = Suisse = Svizzera = Switzerland : offizielle Reisezeitschrift der Schweiz. Verkehrszentrale, der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen, Privatbahnen ... [et al.]**

Band (Jahr): **39 (1966)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **29.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-778307>

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

I have just learned that there are more clubs, or *Vereins*, in Switzerland than there are people. This fact encouraged me to look into the matter further. Now, in the interests of international understanding and good will (and after months of careful study), I am prepared to make public the results of my analysis.

First of all, it is important to realize that without *Vereins* Swiss democracy simply would not work. The clubs offer an opportunity for the meeting of minds, a chance to air the pros and cons of the ever more complex issues which constantly face a working democracy.

What are these clubs and what is their significance? To understand this, one must project oneself into the life of the average Swiss male. Everyone enjoys camaraderie, and the Swiss is no exception. And because each Swiss male of voting age belongs, according to my analysis, to 5.27 clubs, he has free access to his fellow voters. Perhaps more important—and here the type of club plays a role—it gives him opportunity to engage in his favorite sports, like card-playing, beer-drinking and smoking.

Many citizens believe in a more active form of sport, like bird-watching, chess-playing or fishing—and almost every Swiss community of more than 100 inhabitants includes such pastimes in its official list of available *Vereins*. I made a particular study of the Bird-Watching and Bowling Clubs of Wahnsins, a village in the Knirps Valley, because, it seemed to me, the town offered conditions which could be classified as typical for all of Switzerland.

The Bird-Watching Club of Wahnsins was founded three years ago this month, and I was thus able to partake in the festivities on the occasion of its triennial anniversary. As all clubs, it meets in a particular inn once each week. When I visited them, they were meeting in the Gasthof zum Schmerz, where all their trophies and club banners were displayed for the benefit of posterity. There were trophies for the most birds observed and trophies for unusual birds, trophies from other clubs and copies of trophies presented to other clubs during anniversary dinners, which take place twice each week. This particular evening, the members of the Bowling Club (eight of whom were members of the Bird-Watching Club) were official guests of the Bird-Watching Club (eleven of whose members were in the Chess Club). Since fourteen of those present were also in six other clubs, it would have been inconsiderate and discourteous not to invite the members of those clubs as well. Thus half the population of Wahnsins (the men) was present as the mayor stood up to greet his fellow club citizens.

After a solemn introduction befitting the occasion, the mayor announced that a special trophy, commemorating the evening, was to be given to the Bowling Club. He asked the president of the club to step forward so that the ceremony could proceed. There was no response.

"Mr. Mayor", said Vogel J. Pflügel, president of the Bird-Watching Club, "you are the president of the Bowling Club—since last Saturday night, remember?"

"Oh yes, of course", countered the mayor, "how silly of me. But I cannot present this gorgeous silver plate to myself, it must come from someone else."

This posed a knotty procedural problem, such as many Swiss citizens face each day in a working democracy. After some moments of deliberation, the vice-chairman of the Fishing Club, Helmholtz

Hecht, offered to conduct the ceremony as *ex officio* chairman. A vote was taken. (The members agreed—with three abstentions and five incorrectly marked ballots—to continue so that the evening could be concluded before *Polizeistunde*, the officially designated bedtime for the community.)

Helmholtz Hecht then took the floor. He pointed out that few organizations in Wahnsins had done as much to support local industry as had the Bowling Club. The director of the largest local industry seconded the remark and personally thanked the club—and all the clubs in the Knirps Valley. "Without you", he said gratefully, "our brewery would not today be among the most important in Switzerland. You have all helped to support our international slogan:

When beer is near, there's cheer, my dear"

The club members then proposed a collective toast to themselves, followed by another. A general discussion then took place among working committee officers on new developments and progress made during the previous six days. The acting president of the Chess Club announced that a commission had been appointed to study the feasibility of increasing the squares on a chessboard by one.

"Point of order!" a voice called. "I agree with the hypothesis and the supposition", said the voice, "but my colleagues and I want to know whether you plan to increase the white squares or the black squares." A vote was taken. It was agreed to send the matter back to committee to study the practicality of adding one red square with a white cross in it to the sixty-four existing squares of the common chessboard. This square would be a resting-place for weary traveling kings and queens, a spot to relax on when not facing the hectic battle of the outside world.

The assemblage cheered. The chairman of the Feathered Friend Committee of the Bird-Watching Club proposed a toast to the Chess Club and suggested that a special commemorative coin be struck, since this evening would go down in history. A vote was taken.

The proposal was accepted, with two articles added, the most important of which was that everyone present would receive a miniature copy—in bronze—of the actual coin, and that each club would receive an original copy for its trophy case.

There the matter rested while the club members exchanged pleasantries with each other and took time out to eat. Since this was a special occasion, the chef of the Gasthof zum Schmerz had prepared a special meal consisting of Sharkfin Soup, *Saumon fumé* and *Bratwurst avec roesti*, with assorted Swiss cheeses for dessert.

As the evening drew to a close, the mayor stood up again. "My trophy—I haven't received the trophy I was going to give myself!" Horrified expressions crossed the faces of everyone. "Where is my trophy? It's gone and lost forever!" the mayor cried.

From one of the back tables a shriek was heard. "Was that silver plate the *bowling* trophy?" asked the shriek. "Heavens to William Tell, I just ate my *Bratwurst avec roesti* off of it!"

After a brief discussion, it was agreed to have the plate washed and polished and presented by the mayor to the president of the Bowling Club during the next meeting.

"But Mr. Mayor", said Vogel J. Pflügel, of the Bird-Watching Club, "you can't do that. You forgot again that *you* are the president of the Bowling Club!" The assemblage then took the information under advisement and a vote was taken.